

A Socialism of Empiricism, Not Ideology: Paul Lazarsfeld and Commitment in Social Research

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Paul Lazarsfeld's upbringing was infused with the revolutionary potential and moral commitment of early 20th-century socialism. He was virtually raised by the leaders of the Austrian Social Democrats who frequented his mother's salons, including Friedrich Adler and Otto Bauer. Lazarsfeld's coming of age perfectly coincided with the birth of the Austrian republic and the new possibility of building a rational, socialist society. The organization of social research toward progressive ends was, for Lazarsfeld, a moral calling as much as it was a profession. Beyond his talents as a quantitative sociologist, Lazarsfeld was able to command the devotion of his researchers and sponsors, such as Robert Lynd, in large part because of his social-democratic bona fides. Yet Lazarsfeld would clash with those colleagues who were most forthright in their leftist commitments, notably Lynd, Theodor W. Adorno, and C. Wright Mills. Focusing less on these well-documented episodes than on the character of Lazarsfeld's research projects, this article takes the view that it was not socialism as political ideology but rather socialism as empirical practice that defined the Lazarsfeld corpus.

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Paul Lazarsfeld had an extraordinarily politicized upbringing that, by his own account, implanted an optimistic yet pragmatic form of socialism as a fundamental part of his character, probably more salient than his Jewishness. "Just as I'm a Viennese, I'm a Socialist," he once assured his friend and Columbia colleague Daniel Bell, a statement of complete sincerity sprinkled with only the slightest hint of facetiousness (Lazarsfeld, 1962b, p. 262).

The details of Lazarsfeld's socialist upbringing are well established: His mother, the progressive sex psychologist Sofie Lazarsfeld, regularly hosted salons in the family home attended by the intellectual leaders of the Social Democratic Workers Party (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* or SDAP), including Otto Bauer, Rudolf Hilferding, and Max Adler. Young Paul had a veritable surrogate father in the antiwar activist Friedrich Adler—the son of the party's founder, Victor—who galvanized young leftists with an act of political assassination that signaled the coming end of the Habsburg Empire and the birth of a new republic. Lazarsfeld's involvement as a participant and leader in the socialist youth movement was so consuming that his comrade, colleague, and first wife Marie Jahoda said that, for them, Austro-Marxism encompassed "life as a whole in the here and now" (Jahoda, 1983, p. 343). In the interest of life-education, or *Bildung*, and as part of the intellectual socialist vanguard, he would volunteer as a lecturer in the provinces to heighten the class consciousness of workers and create what Max Adler called the enlightened *neue Menschen* of the future. Like his mother, he was a

devotee of the psychologist Alfred Adler, the progressive socialists' answer to the oedipal pessimism of Freud. As the director of the Österreichische Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle (ÖWF), he revolutionized cooperative social research as the real fulfillment of the practical possibilities of applied Marxism through investigations into the relationship between socioeconomic structures and subjective experiences. Most famously, the ÖWF's methods were epitomized in an innovative study of unemployed workers and their families in the village of Marienthal, an idea that sprang from Bauer's urging. Although the study's conclusions about the dearth of revolutionary consciousness would come as an unpleasant surprise to its socialist backers, it became known as an indictment of the ravages of capitalism on the material and psychological condition of proletarian families. Thanks to the helpful intervention of his mentor, Charlotte Bühler, Lazarsfeld became known to the sponsors of social research at the Rockefeller Foundation as one of the "bright young promising people" doing empirical studies (Lazarsfeld, 1961a, p. 6). Bühler's endorsement, channeled through the recommendation of an Austrian expert, was sufficient to satisfy the foundation officer in Paris, who had to remind Lazarsfeld to resubmit a "misfiled" application that he had never actually completed (Lazarsfeld, 1961a). And so Lazarsfeld would embark on his fellowship in the United States, just as Austria faced a new fascist threat in 1933 (Fleck, 2011, pp. 49–64; Fleck & Stehr, 2011, pp. 2–3).

Yet despite the impressive résumé and unquestionable socialist bona fides, probably the starkest conflicts of Lazarsfeld's professional career were with his colleagues in sociology who ought to have been his comrades on the left: Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, C. Wright Mills, and even Robert Lynd, Lazarsfeld's chief sponsor, mentor, and frequent savior in the United States, who nevertheless would be disappointed by Lazarsfeld's persistent attraction to market research studies, which he found unfitting for a committed socialist (Lipset, n.d.). "He always felt that it is selling out to the capitalists," Lazarsfeld (1962a) recalled (p. 127).¹ While Lazarsfeld maintained longstanding friendships with his colleagues in sociology such as Samuel Stouffer, a relatively apolitical Republican whom he greatly admired, his contempt for the stridently left-wing Mills would become almost absolute. Although Lazarsfeld (1962c) had personally invited Mills, whom he had heard was a "clever and initiative boy," to join first his research bureau and then the sociology faculty at Columbia in the mid-1940s, he came to believe that Mills wrote "ridiculous" (Lazarsfeld, 1962a, p. 149) things and never did "any decent piece of research" (Lazarsfeld, 1961b, p. 55). The feeling was mutual right up to Mills's untimely death in 1962; Lazarsfeld skipped the funeral and had no regrets about having actively blocked the career of this "utterly immoral and repulsive" man, whom he ultimately refused to have anything to do with (Lazarsfeld, 1962c, p. 368). When the student revolts of 1968 came—with the late Mills elevated as an antiestablishment hero of the New Left—Lazarsfeld, who was then shuttling between Paris and New York, exhibited little patience for the chaos and disruption caused by this younger generation of leftists (Lazarsfeld, 1968a, 1968b).

What explains Lazarsfeld's friction with—or, in the case of Mills, outright dismissal of—these leftist colleagues, and what is the cause for his relative lack of interest in the New Left, despite his socialist past? Did he simply drop the socialist element of social research in preference for the statistical solace he found in his analytical methods, a scholarly approach that merely floated on a "residue of socialist sentiment"

¹ On Lazarsfeld's complicated relationship with Lynd, see Wheatland (2009). Lazarsfeld's relationship with Adorno is well covered in many sources, including Fleck (2011) and Morrison (1978), as well as Adorno's (1969) and Lazarsfeld's (1969a) own accounts in Fleming and Bailyn (1969). On Lazarsfeld's relationship with Mills, see Sterne (2005) and Horowitz (1983).

(Morrison, 1998, p. 40)? And, in present-day parlance, what was it that made Lazarsfeld somewhat of a “problematic” person of the left for those who ought to have been his ideological allies? A clue to this paradox may be found in the peculiar nature of Austro-Marxism, a movement that maintained a reverence for empirical social research and a skepticism of ideological purity, which many Austrian Social Democrats associated with their communist political enemies.

For the Austro-Marxists, socialism would not be realized through class warfare or by an impotent yearning for the historical blossoming of dialectical inevitability. Instead, it would be achieved through the more practical labors of the empirical social sciences, progressive social reforms and taxation schemes, and the nurturing of a culture of socialism through clubs and cultural organizations, especially among the working classes and youth. Cooperative social research enterprises would endeavor to identify social problems and their causes and propose solutions. This would be achieved through the political apparatus of the SDAP, especially when the party had real power in the revolutionary period of “municipal socialism” that defined “Red Vienna” in the early days of the first Austrian republic. For the Austro-Marxists, Marxism was essentially the ultimate social science that set the paradigm for the critical analysis of society. The experiences of workers and their families in Vienna could provide a real-world basis for study and projects of reform. Reforms could be eminently practical, such as the Social Democrats’ massive public housing program, but they were also part of a larger effort of social engineering (Gruber, 1991).

To some extent, the Austro-Marxists shared this interest in the uses of the social sciences with their intellectual cousins, once removed, at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt, with whom they shared a mentor in the Institut’s first director, Carl Grünberg. Before taking that position, Grünberg was a prominent Marxist professor of political economy at the University of Vienna, where he taught Hilferding, Friedrich Adler, Max Adler, Bauer, and others. This cohort of socialist students followed Grünberg’s emphasis on systematic sociological investigations buttressed by a rigorous study of history, and they were also inspired by his emphasis on continuous worker education (*Bildung*). With the future leader of the party, Bauer, as editor, the young Austro-Marxists founded a monthly journal in 1907, *Der Kampf*, which became a venue for the support of the investigatory powers of the social sciences to discover economic facts and insights into the cultural life of the working classes, all toward the end of integrating them into the movement toward socialism. In that journal and in the party organ, *Die Arbeiter-Zeitung*, Bauer and others would articulate the “third way” politics of the Austro-Marxists, more engaged in social engineering than traditional reformism, but eschewing the uncompromising social inversion demanded by the radical Bolsheviks (Bottomore & Goode, 1978).

Born in 1901, Lazarsfeld, was just coming of age as the new Austrian republic came into being on November 12, 1918, and his childhood heroes were suddenly among the leaders of Red Vienna. Friedrich Adler—whom Lazarsfeld had visited regularly while he was in prison, occasionally smuggling out his manuscripts—was released and exonerated, and he encouraged Lazarsfeld to pursue mathematics with the idea that it would somehow be put to use for the socialist cause (Lazarsfeld, 1961a). Lazarsfeld was immersed in the movement as a leader of socialist summer camps and youth groups, and through this activity he became well acquainted with Jahoda, whom he would marry, and Hans Zeisel, his other main collaborator along with Jahoda on the *Marienthal* study. He began to write about using education to develop

socialist personalities, while educators themselves had a responsibility to gain an understanding of the psychological motivations of youth (Lazarsfeld, 1923).

After a year studying in Paris (Lazarsfeld, 1969b; "Paul Lazarsfeld, Fondateur," 1979) and derailed designs to become an assistant to Friedrich Adler, who had become secretary of the Socialist International in Zürich, Lazarsfeld resolved to complete a PhD in mathematics, which he took in 1925, whereupon he began teaching in a *Gymnasium*. Encouraged by a friend from the socialist youth movement, Lazarsfeld had been attending the lectures of Karl and Charlotte Bühler, who had established the Psychological Institute at the University of Vienna in 1922. Lazarsfeld took an interest in Charlotte's studies of child and adolescent psychology, and he was particularly fascinated by the Böhlers' study of *action*, or the interplay of outside influences and interior motives that produced decisions and behavioral choices. This would become the basis for motivation research, a central aspect of Lazarsfeld's later consumer studies.

In one formative episode, Lazarsfeld applied a statistical analysis to a questionnaire that a socialist youth leader had been using merely as a source of anecdotal quotations. The tabulations were done by Lazarsfeld's friends from the socialist student organizations, applying a "secondary" analysis to the questionnaires to interpret statistically significant results (Fleck, 1998). This was where Lazarsfeld found his calling as a conductor of useful, interdisciplinary social research. It was an expression of the practical side of the socialist movement that had a clarity of purpose, untainted by intraparty squabbles or bogged down in the theoretical abstractions that had beset intellectual Marxism. Lazarsfeld found this process to be not only of social and intellectual value, but also immensely pleasurable and even "visceral fun" and infused with the adventurous spirit that delighted him at the socialist summer camps. Charlotte Bühler was so impressed by the results of the secondary analysis, which Lazarsfeld had presented in a seminar, that she invited him to give a course on survey research and statistics (Lazarsfeld, 1961a). He would later assemble his lectures as an important instructional book on statistics for teachers and psychologists, *Statistisches Praktikum für Psychologen und Lehrer*, published in 1929 (Neurath, 1998). By then, Lazarsfeld was an assistant at the Psychological Institute with some hope of attaining a more legitimate post (*Privatdozent*) to teach at the university (Fleck & Stehr, 2011, pp. 3–4). His ongoing, municipally sponsored studies of the occupational choices of proletarian youths and the limited "scope" with which they viewed their lives relative to middle-class youths would be published in 1931 as *Jugend und Beruf*. Charlotte Bühler had little tolerance for polemics, and through the editing of this text she coaxed Lazarsfeld to strip out the moralizing statements and let the facts speak for themselves, a formative experience that would become his lifelong practice (Lazarsfeld, 1962b).

Lazarsfeld's interest in motivation and the study of choice would lead to his setting up the ÖWF as an independent economic-psychological research center, not officially associated with but vaguely adjacent to the university. A student had clued him in to the practice of consumer market research, which, by way of commercial contracts, presented itself as a way to financially support a collaborative, empirical research enterprise employing many interviewers, surveyors, and tabulators (Lazarsfeld, 1973). Although it had Karl Bühler as its president, the ÖWF was not strictly an academic organization, being overseen by a board of prominent economists, trade unionists, and businessmen. The convenient arrangement allowed Lazarsfeld to conduct his research, employ his socialist friends, and put off the awkward fact that the simmering anti-Semitism at the university precluded him from having a real chance at a professorship. It also flattered his

desire to be a leader of organizations of collective action: Taking an interest in the day-to-day lives of workers and consumers was entirely in line with the Social Democrats' desire to use social research to understand and improve the lives of ordinary people. It was, essentially, a mutually beneficial arrangement between business interests and academic social scientists, the former getting useful intelligence on the tastes and preferences of their consumer markets and the latter getting a renewable source of funding to support a staff of researchers. They were always kept busy with new projects, new questions, and new challenges (Lazarsfeld, 1969a).

By themselves these studies of consumer habits may have seemed rather trivial in the view of an academic theoretician, but the roughly forty studies Lazarsfeld directed between 1927 and 1933 allowed him and his researchers to practice and refine their methods and assemble an accurate picture of working-class life and the values, habits, worldviews, and concerns of the various socioeconomic classes. Lazarsfeld's interest in the psychology of choice and motivation made him particularly innovative when it came to finding answers that respondents themselves were not fully aware of. Apparently superfluous details might turn out to be fundamentally important through such an analysis: Statistics was a way of translating the squishy and complicated living processes into numbers as a means of revealing patterns of social phenomena that might otherwise be hidden. Motives were discovered, as it were, by constructing a matrix of behaviors that was more revealing than the sorting of simple statements about preferences. The methods of coding, tabulating, analysis, and interpretation developed at the ÖWF and continued at Lazarsfeld's later research centers would ultimately be articulated by Hans Zeisel (1947) in his landmark instructional book, *Say It With Figures*, which would go through many editions.

Going to the United States on the Rockefeller fellowship in 1933 would be a foundational experience in Lazarsfeld's success as an innovative market researcher, as an analyst of mass communications media at the Princeton Radio Research Project, and as the director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia. Because he had already collaborated with Max Horkheimer's institute in Frankfurt on research projects such as Erich Fromm's studies on authority and the family, he was well acquainted with their approach when they found themselves exiled together in New York; to them, he was known as an expert practitioner of the "administrative" kind of research (Lazarsfeld, 1941). Lazarsfeld's antagonist, Mills, would later disparage this style of research in *The Sociological Imagination* as "abstracted empiricism," determined by methodology and the "Statistical Ritual," and essentially uninterested in the "great social problems and human issues of our time." In fact, it was born of the necessity of circumstances and still deeply concerned with social problems, albeit of a more quotidian nature than Mills (1959) may have been attuned to (pp. 71–73). Mills (1959) held on to the ideal of "individual autonomy" as opposed to "bureaucratic work" (p. 106), but in so doing he betrayed a degree of egotism that was ill-fitted to a cooperative research enterprise that used a division of labor to produce an objective understanding of social life.

Mills's mid-1940s misadventures in Decatur, Illinois, are the stuff of legend. He came on as a new researcher for the bureau to conduct research sponsored by a magazine publisher on the "horizontal" influence of local opinion leaders, but he completely neglected to carry out Lazarsfeld's precise methodological instructions. From Lazarsfeld's perspective, it was a disaster and an abdication of duty, and exactly the wrong way to go about gathering data for a community study. The offense was compounded, in Lazarsfeld's view, when Mills (1951) used the material he had gathered in Decatur for his own book, *White*

Collar, which Lazarsfeld found to be “very dumb” (Lazarsfeld, 1962c, p. 366). What Lazarsfeld could salvage from the Decatur study would ultimately be published with Elihu Katz in 1955 as *Personal Influence*, which would be the bureau’s most successful book. Arguing against the view that the media held great psychological power over the masses, Lazarsfeld and Katz advanced what would become known as the “limited effects” paradigm of media influence. It was a view that was amenable to a positive understanding of popular culture in a democratic society, where “opinion leaders” in communities were themselves another medium of mass communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 11; Pooley, 2006, p. 134). But when the sociologist and former Students for a Democratic Society leader Todd Gitlin (1978) later denounced the Decatur study as being emblematic of “academic sociology’s ideological assimilation into modern capitalism and its institutional rapprochement with major foundations and corporations in an oligopolistic high-consumption society” (p. 224), he seemed to be summoning the ghost of Mills.

Where Lazarsfeld departed from colleagues such as Mills, Lynd, and Adorno was not the degree to which he was committed to the cause of socialism; rather, it was his insistence on using the methods of social research to reveal the facts, whatever they were, and regardless of whether they were in accord with a preestablished theory of social relations, consumption patterns, and economic structures. In the pragmatic, scientific spirit of Austro-Marxism, Lazarsfeld made the investigation part of the process, and to prejudice the investigation would be to corrupt its methods and conclusions, which might not be in accord with a socialist-progressive’s wishful thinking about how things and people ought to be. When social science, faithfully executed, is understood as a part of a gradual move to socialism rather than merely a venue for theoretical critiques biased by a political bent, the immediate results may be unsettling, but they are ultimately more satisfying and also more true. This was the opposite of the approach taken by Adorno, who would demonstrate a tendency to pervert empirical research by using it not as a venue of discovery and interpretation that could lead to dispiriting results, but rather as an instrument to prove typologies and abstractions that had already been established, and which served the larger project of critical theory (Fleck, 2011, p. 257).

Perhaps the lesson of following the evidence wherever it might lead became firmly set in Lazarsfeld’s mind as a result of the famous *Marienthal* study that he directed with Jahoda and Zeisel, his final European study before emigration and an enduring classic of social research (Jahoda, Zeisel, & Lazarsfeld, 1933). The idea for a community study was itself partly inspired by Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown*, though, as Lazarsfeld had originally envisioned it, it was to be a study of leisure time in some community. But when Lazarsfeld shared the idea with Otto Bauer, the socialist leader found it to be “pretty stupid” and almost offensive to study leisure, considering the fact that mass unemployment was plaguing Austria at the time (Lazarsfeld, 1962b, p. 227). Devastated by unemployment and located a convenient one-hour commute from Vienna, the village of Marienthal was chosen for the study. With financial support from the trade unions, the Vienna Chamber of Labor—then under the leadership of the Social Democrats—and grant monies from the Rockefeller Foundation, the study commenced in the fall of 1931, and it would take six months to collect the data and a year and a half to write it. The study is remarkable for its mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. While it includes liberal quotations from ordinary people and compelling narrative descriptions—a degree of intimacy achieved through researchers’ clever integration in the community—the study also soberly establishes social typologies that were not simply applied from Marxian theory but actually *emerged* from the collection and analysis of empirical data (Fleck, 2002).

The study is known for its conclusion that the most prevalent psychological condition among the unemployed workers of Marienthal could be characterized as *resigned*, not the hoped-for revolutionary sentiment. But the manner by which the researchers came to this conclusion is important, and a recent article by Charles H. Clavey (2021) provides a crucial contribution to our understanding of Lazarsfeld's methods. Clavey emphasizes that the interpretive types developed by the ÖWF researchers—*broken*, *unbroken*, and *resigned*—were not creative appellations of some autonomous intellectual, but the outcome of a scientific method of categorization that Lazarsfeld had described in his *Statistisches Praktikum*. This method produced statistical types on the basis of individuals' distance from the mean of daily units of consumption. The researchers found a relationship between an individual's level of consumption and their psychological state, such that fairly precise divisions between statistical types, and thus interpretive types, could be identified. The finding that *resignation* as a psychological state was so prevalent among the unemployed in Marienthal was particularly dispiriting to the study's socialist backers because it meant that the workers' distance from the ideal state of the *neue Menschen* was greater than had been presumed. The depressing conclusion was that the "slow revolution" toward socialism would not get any speedier as a result of such a catastrophic revelation of capitalism's contradictions; rather, it stopped dead in a pitiable state.

The findings of Lazarsfeld and his corps of researchers were not at all what they or their socialist supporters had set out to find, which is, of course, the point of empirical social research. The tedium of empirical research and the uncertainty of its outcomes, particularly when those outcomes might clash with one's cherished expectations or political commitments, was something that antiestablishment mavericks like Mills and critical theorists like Adorno had little patience for. But the dedication to empirical social science that was part of the character of Austro-Marxism as a variant of European socialism meant that commitment to the cause was commitment to the facts, wherever they might lead.

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